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McNamara ends silence to defend Westmoreland

NEW YORK (AP) — Former Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara yesterday broke his long public silence about Vietnam to defend retired Gen. William C. Westmoreland, the wartime commander accused by CBS of suppressing the facts about enemy strength.

Testifying in General Westmoreland's \$120 million libel suit against the network and three of its employees, Mr. McNamara said he repeatedly warned CBS producer George Crile in 1981 that the thesis of "The Uncounted Enemy: A Vietnam Deception" was wrong.

"I kept repeating that I did not believe the data had been faked. I did not believe the data had been suppressed. I did not believe General Westmoreland had conspired to deceive the president and me," Mr. McNamara said.

The CBS documentary, broadcast in January, 1982, alleged that the general had headed a 1967 "conspiracy" to suppress the news that Communist strength was much greater than had been believed and that it was still growing. As a result, said CBS, President Lyndon B. Johnson and others in Washington may have been taken by surprise when the Communists launched their powerful Tet offensive in early 1968.

Mr. McNamara, who was secretary of defense in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, has not been questioned in public about the war since leaving the Pentagon. He has had to answer questions from lawyers in pretrial proceedings in the Westmoreland case and in litigation over the herbicide Agent Orange.

Mr. McNamara repeated, virtually word for word, General Westmoreland's explanation that the intelligence disputes reported in the CBS documentary reflected "honest differences of opinion" among intelligence analysts, not an attempt to deceive President Johnson into believing the war was being won.

The general, he said, "is a person of tremendous integrity with whom I had major policy disagreements but who served his country well, and who I had the highest regard for."

"If Mr. Westmoreland had conspired to deceive the president and me, he could not have done so," Mr. McNamara said. "And even if he had succeeded in deceiving the president and me it wouldn't have made any difference, because I did not believe the war could be won militarily."

Under cross-examination by CBS lawyer David E. Boies, Mr. McNamara said that he concluded sometime between late 1965 and mid-1966 the war could not be won militarily and that he forwarded this opinion to President Johnson in a number of secret memos.

A verbal sparring match followed, with Mr. Boies attempting to demonstrate that through late 1967, Mr. McNamara had offered a much more optimistic view of the war to Congress and the public, a contention the former official disputed.

He said that Congress and the press knew he doubted the word of General Westmoreland and other commanders under him that the war could be won on the battlefield, and that those views came out at an August, 1967, Senate committee hearing.

"The purpose of that hearing was to show that there was a difference of opinion between the chiefs [the Joint Chiefs of Staff] and McNamara," the former cabinet officer said. "The chiefs believed the bombing [of North Vietnam] was effective and we should be doing more bombing, and this poor inexperienced civilian didn't know what the hell was going on."

At the time, a major part of the military debate was over whether U.S. bombing of targets in North Vietnam would weaken the Communist war effort in South Vietnam.

General Westmoreland asked President Johnson in 1967 to give him up to 200,000 additional troops in an effort to bring the war to a relatively quick end. American forces in Vietnam at the time stood at more than 450,000.

Mr. Boies introduced a previously top-secret memo from Mr. McNamara to the president in which the secretary said the Westmoreland plan "could lead to a major national disaster; it would not win the Vietnam War, but only submerge it in a larger one."

China might have intervened on the side of the North, particularly if the Hanoi government were threatened, Mr. McNamara told Mr. Johnson.

The president eventually gave General Westmoreland only 47,000 additional troops as part of what Mr. McNamara called "a sound military-political-pacification-diplomatic package that gets things moving toward a successful outcome in a few years."